

## Review

Craig G Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding our Place in the Biblical Story*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2024. ISBN: 9781540966018.

By Terry G. Hiebert, PhD

*The Drama of Scripture* by Bartholomew and Goheen is the third edition with over 200,000 copies sold in a growing number of languages. Prefacing this twentieth anniversary edition, the authors maintain, “few things are more urgent today than recovering the Bible as one story in a way that leads us to Christ in whom we can be restored to our full humanity for the sake of the world” (xiii).

The authors ask the question, “is there a *true story of the whole world* in which I am called to live my life” (xxii)? Craig G. Bartholomew, director of the Kirby Laing Centre of Public Theology in Cambridge, and Michael W. Goheen, professor of missional theology at Calvin Theological Seminary share insights on worldview studies, biblical studies, and missiology to provide the answer. The authors claim, “we tell the story of the Bible as a coherent and true drama in order to subvert the powerful narrative that dominates our culture and holds so many, including Christians, in bondage” (xxv). Following N. T. Wright’s five act Shakespearian drama structure, the authors add Act 6, *The Return of the King: Redemption Completed*. This future act focuses readers on the God’s goal in living the biblical story.

Acts 1-3 narrate the story of the Old Testament, starting in Genesis, where God establishes His Kingdom in creation. The creation stories are polemics against competing ANE origins accounts, highlighting a distinctive relationship between God and human image bearers. The creation mandate and human vocation in the garden sets the direction for the future redemption of creation. Rebellion in the Kingdom explains why the world is in such a mess. Human freedom to choose and assert autonomy is the fundamental element of the fall. Sin undermines self, belonging to others, social/work dimensions, and fundamentally a vital relationship with God. Post-fall, God initiates the process of redemption by choosing Israel and providing a land. “Israel in the land is meant to be a taste of what God intends for the whole of His creation” (61).

The interlude is a concise retelling of the intertestamental period. By this time, Israel's faithful share five fundamental beliefs: monotheism, election, Torah, land-temple, and future hope. Jews in the diaspora encounter the Persians, Romans, and

Greeks. The Maccabean revolt sets the stage for differing expressions of Israel's hope. The Pharisees emphasize boundary markers, the Essenes withdraw, the Sadducees collaborate with Rome, the Zealots chose violent resistance, and the common people hope for God's redemption in the end.

Acts 4-6 depict the coming of the kingdom, but in unexpected ways. These acts tell the story of the coming of the king (redemption accomplished), spreading the news of the king (mission of the church), and the return of the king (redemption completed). The story of Jesus from Mark, with parallels in other gospels, recount God's purposes for redemption. The authors stress that Jesus' message, mighty works, and radical table fellowship indicate a different way of bringing in the kingdom. "The Kingdom of God does not come with violence or military power (as many Jews expected) but with words authenticated by deeds" (137). They emphasize the scandal of the cross to Jewish minds and the counterintuitive victory of God through Jesus' death and resurrection. "This apparently meaningless act of violence and cruelty in fact reveals the fullest purpose of God: his judgment against sin, and his power and will to renew the creation" (153).

Luke's story of the gospel's expansion and the life Paul receive substantial attention. After his conversion, Paul becomes a preacher and teacher of the gospel of "the power of God to liberate and rescue humanity from their otherwise hopeless situation" (188). For Paul, Jesus is the culmination of the Jewish story, and in the new Exodus the new creation has arrived. This gospel of salvation is defined as God's restoration of true humanity, to "take up their Edenic vocation once again, to be at last what God designed humanity to be from the first" (189). At the end of the story in Acts, the authors return to N.T. Wright's concept of improvisation and consistency with the preceding acts. Remembering earlier biblical themes, the authors claim that salvation is not an escape from creation but rather "a restoration of God's rule over all of creation and all human life" (197).

Focusing on the goal of history, Bartholomew and Goheen to anticipate God's purposes for the restoration of all things. Future redemption is not an escape into a spiritualized heaven but a restoration of God's creation on a new earth, of which believers already have a foretaste (212). How much continuity or discontinuity the new creation has with the present creation remains unclear. But with J.A. Seiss, they agree that redemption must go as far as the consequences of sin. God's final purpose is cosmic restoration, the reconciling *all things* (213). But *not all persons* will be restored, because names not found in the book of life will be excluded (214).

*The Drama of Scripture* offers a memorable narrative framework for retelling the redemption story. The authors have provided a valuable introduction to the biblical story and theology. Where do readers find their place in the biblical story? The answer contains brief examples from the world of business and creation care. For readers looking for more complete answers, see Michael Goheen and Jim Mullins, *The Symphony of Mission* (2019) or Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Great Story and the Great Commission* (2024). The authors seem to resist advising readers *not* to follow the biblical story as in the case of holy wars (59-60). Comments would be helpful on biblical practices not in harmony with God's redemptive goals.

Bartholomew and Goheen's biblical narrative theology as an introduction is quite comprehensive. Readers will appreciate the occasional deeper analyses seen in Israel's wilderness wanderings (41) or the Messianic temptations of Jesus (117). Comments in the end notes provide helpful detail on issues, such the explanation why a theology of cosmic redemption is needed to counterbalance an Augustinian spiritualization of heaven or the Enlightenment's individualistic narrowing of the scope of salvation (235). While most biblical books are included in their retelling, OT wisdom literature is a surprise omission, considering these books reflect on God's reign in creational and cosmic realms. Books like Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes would reinforce the author's emphasis on God's rule in creation.

The book continues to serve as a valuable introduction to the biblical narrative for pastors, teachers, and interested laypersons. Instructors in college, seminary, and adult Bible classes can access the Baker website for free teaching outlines and lesson PowerPoints. After 20 years, *The Drama of Scripture* still fulfills an important need for the biblical story to inform and transform lives today.

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